

# Facts & Information

August 1999

## Residential Curbside Recycling

Recycling has changed the relationship we have with our trash. We used to shove things we didn't need into a couple of large metal cans so the garbage truck could haul them off to the landfill. Now we separate reusable materials from the waste stream and sort them so they can be efficiently picked up in front of our homes.

### Why we recycle

In 1985, the state legislature adopted a law that created residential curbside recycling programs in every county of the state. The objective was to make recycling more convenient, thus reducing the amount of garbage going to the state's landfills and other waste disposal facilities. At the time, disposal rates were climbing rapidly. While the pace of disposal rate increases has slowed since then, recycling has become a critical component of our state's waste management strategy.

There are more personal reasons for wanting to recycle, however. The most obvious is recycling can reduce your garbage bill. We pay the same for recycling whether we put out one aluminum can or 30 pounds of paper, cans, and bottles. In contrast, the more garbage we put out, the more we pay. By recycling, we can put less trash in the can and keep more cash in our checking account.

A less obvious benefit of recycling is what we learn about the garbage we create. Because we sort the recyclable material from the non-recyclable material, we become more aware of the stuff we throw away, such as excessive packing. By becoming more aware of what we throw away, we can be more careful about what we buy. By buying more cautiously and reusing more items, we save money.

There is also the economic impact of preventing valuable materials from being thrown away. A state study showed that in spite of our state's 30 percent recycling rate, roughly 1.6 million tons of readily recyclable material still enters the state's waste stream every year. The recycled dollar value of this paper, glass, plastic and metal amounts to \$114 million, or roughly \$20 for every person in the state.

### Who decides what is recycled and how

Local governments decide what is recycled. These decisions are made through a solid waste management plan approved by county and city governing officials. Most local programs collect newspapers, glass containers, tin cans and aluminum. Some programs collect mixed paper, household batteries, certain kinds of plastic containers, yardwaste and motor oil. Some programs require that all materials be separated; others do not.



P.O. Box 47250  
1300 S. Evergreen Park SW  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Main: (360)664-1160  
Toll Free: 800-562-6150  
TTY: (360)586-8203

Website: [www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)  
Email: [info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov)

All UTC publications are  
available in alternate formats.  
Call (360)664-1133.

Collection frequency varies between programs. If you have any suggestions about how your program should be designed in the future, you should contact the solid waste division of your city or county.

### **How rates are set**

If your garbage and recyclables are picked up by a private company that is not under contract with a city, the UTC oversees the company's operations and billing to ensure that customers receive quality service at fair rates. When a hauler proposes a rate increase, UTC staff review financial data and receive comments from customers regarding the proposal as well as service quality. The Commission can approve the rate increase or postpone it pending further investigation of the company's proposal.

### **Why you pay for residential recycling even if you don't use it**

Most counties and cities require all residential garbage customers to pay for curbside recycling service even if they do not use it. The reason is two-fold. First, having everyone pay for the program keeps the per customer cost relatively small. Second, if customers have to pay for the service anyway, they are more likely to recycle. As further incentive, some counties, such as Pierce and Thurston, impose a penalty on customers who do not recycle.

### **Why recycling does not pay for itself**

Commercial recycling, that is recycling done by businesses and factories, can be cost effective because the quantities and quality of the recycled materials make for a valuable product. But collection of residential materials is more labor intensive, involving a wide variety of materials, not all of which have much value.

If the only recycled material picked up was aluminum cans, residential curbside service might very well pay for itself. But in recent years, the market for recycled paper has dropped dramatically. And most other recycled materials, such as plastic, do not even come close to covering the cost of collection, processing and storage.

Because the value of recycled materials can fluctuate greatly in a year's time, the UTC requires many haulers to reflect the changes in the value of the recycled materials collected on an annual basis using a line item on the customer's bill. This allows customers to benefit from any market surges in recyclable materials but also protects the hauler from any drops in the market.

### **For more information**

If you have any questions about your residential curbside recycling service provider and the rates charged, call the UTC at 800-562-6150. For questions or comments about the design of your recycling program, contact your city or county solid waste division. For general questions and information about recycling, call the state Department of Ecology at 800-RECYCLE (732-9253).